

MY NIGHTMARE CAREER

FREDDY KRUEGER IS A POP CULTURE ICON. THE GIRL HE TORMENTED HAS BEEN ALL BUT FORGOTTEN. UNTIL NOW. ACTRESS **HEATHER LANGENKAMP** IS SEEKING JUSTICE FOR HER NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET CHARACTER—AND HERSELF—IN THE NEW DOCUMENTARY *I AM NANCY*. BY CLARK COLLIS



MENTION HORROR classic *A Nightmare on Elm Street* to almost anyone, and he or she will immediately think of Freddy Krueger, the dreams-haunting maniac from the 1984 movie, its six sequels, the 2003 spin-off *Freddy vs. Jason*, a recent remake, and countless items of merchandise. People are much less likely

to remember Nancy Thompson, who, as played by Heather Langenkamp, battled Robert Englund's Krueger in three of the films, including the Wes Craven-directed original. And Langenkamp has a problem with that. In March 2009, an employee at the L.A.-based special-effects company the actress co-owns asked if she would be at a special screening of *Nightmare* that Craven was attending the following night. "I was like, 'Oh...I wasn't invited,'" she recalls. So Langenkamp called the office of her friend Craven in hopes that she could tag along with him. "They didn't know my name," she says. "The secretary asked me to spell it. People didn't think about Nancy and Freddy as a duo. But there's a certain amount of actor's pride—you work every day on a movie and...*this* is what you have to show for it?"

Recently, Langenkamp, 47, decided to explore the Nancy phenomenon—or lack thereof—in a new documentary. Titled *I Am Nancy*, the film follows the actress as she attends horror conventions to meet Nancy fans (of whom there seem to be very few), rounds up Nancy merch (of which there is very little), and finds out how many people sport Nancy tattoos on their bodies (almost none). The result, which recently debuted on DVD, is an engagingly tongue-in-cheek affair—at least until the end, when *Nightmare* fans talk about the ways in which the franchise has inspired them to overcome their real-life demons. The testimony of one wheelchair-bound British woman is particularly touching. She recalls how Langenkamp's character helped her recover from the trauma of losing her leg in a car accident: "It was just someone other than me, going through a nightmare."

PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY WES DUVALL

Heather Langenkamp
in *A Nightmare on
Elm Street*; (inset)
with Robert Englund
as Freddy Krueger

LANGENKAMP SHOULD be used to Hollywood's often disappointing ways. She grew up in Tulsa and was cast as an extra in Francis Ford Coppola's 1983 film *The Outsiders*, which was shot in the city. She recently revisited those days when she read the relevant chapter of *Outsiders* star Rob Lowe's autobiography. "He actually mentions that he never could dive into a swimming pool; he could only do cannonballs," she says. "I invited him to our little swim/tennis club and I remember vividly that he would only do cannonballs off the diving board. It was such a fun time." Langenkamp landed a speaking role in Coppola's next movie, *Rumble Fish*. The part got the actress her SAG card, but her appearances in both films ended up on the cutting-room floor. "Francis Ford Coppola must hate me!" she jokes.

For the role of Nancy's boyfriend, Craven cast another new talent: Johnny Depp. Prior to the start of the L.A. production, Langenkamp and the future Capt. Jack Sparrow made a pilgrimage to Griffith Observatory, a shooting location for *Rebel Without a Cause*. "We decided: Let's go up there and revel in this Old Hollywood that we both wish we had been part of," Langenkamp says. "We walked around and talked about Natalie Wood and James Dean. We couldn't have gone to a more perfect place, because he's really become that kind of icon for our industry."

THE SUCCESS OF *A Nightmare on Elm Street*—which cost \$1.8 million but grossed \$25.5 million—helped establish Craven as horror's preeminent director. Meanwhile, the lucrative *Nightmare* franchise ultimately transformed New Line from a tiny distribution company into the production powerhouse later known as "The House That Freddy Built." However, it did not propel Langenkamp onto the A list. Far from it. "The whole culture was so indifferent towards horror," she says. "I would mention it in auditions, and people would nod politely." She says she was "secretly happy" when she was not even approached about appearing in 1985's *A Nightmare on Elm Street 2: Freddy's Revenge*. Instead, that year she starred in the video for ZZ Top's single "Sleeping Bag." "It was so silly," she says. "But meeting them was one of the high points of my young life. I knew my

fortune was changing." Well, not really. Two years later she played Nancy in the Chuck Russell-directed *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors*, at the end of which the character dies. Next she reteamed with Craven for a small role in 1989's *Shocker*—she is credited merely as "Victim"—and spent a couple of years working on the ABC sitcom *Just the Ten of Us*. "I do wish I'd had a better career," she says. "Who wouldn't?" Craven believes she may have suffered because of her reputation as a "scream queen," and that she was also penalized for not looking like the typical Tinseltown starlet. "I liked that Heather had a natural beauty," he says. "But Hollywood always thinks everybody has to look strikingly beautiful in a certain mold. Everything just perfect, perfect." (For the record, Craven is mortified by the idea that anyone in his employ asked Langenkamp to spell her name: "It could have been an intern.")

“PEOPLE DIDN'T THINK ABOUT FREDDY AND NANCY AS A DUO,” SAYS LANGENKAMP. **“BUT THERE'S A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF ACTOR'S PRIDE—YOU WORK EVERY DAY ON A MOVIE AND... THIS IS WHAT YOU HAVE TO SHOW FOR IT.”**

The end of *Just the Ten of Us* led to a frightening period for Langenkamp. "People were upset when that show was canceled, and I was made aware of a stalker who had made threats against other people on the show," she says. "I was informed by the FBI that I needed to be very cautious about my comings and goings. It upset me a great deal."

One day Langenkamp discussed the situation over lunch with Craven, who had recently been asked by New Line to revive the *Nightmare* franchise. Craven came up with the idea that Langenkamp should play herself in the seventh installment, in which she would be stalked by Freddy Krueger. The end product, *Wes Craven's New Nightmare*, even nodded to the fact that Langenkamp, and Nancy Thompson, had long been overshadowed by the cult of Krueger in a scene where the actress waits, bored, while Englund signs autographs as himself. The 1994 film was the least successful in the series, although its postmodernist high jinks paved the way for Craven's next horror franchise, *Scream*.

While Craven was working with a new generation of stars, Langenkamp concentrated on raising her two children, having married Anderson in a 1990 ceremony at which Charlie Sheen acted as best man. Yep, *that* Charlie Sheen. "My husband and Charlie Sheen played Little League together. They've always been best friends," she says. "There was a really scary bachelor party. My husband was whisked off to Vegas, where there was a long night of debauchery. I know a blowup-sheep doll was pushed out of

a window at one point." Given recent events, perhaps we should be grateful it wasn't a real sheep. The actress laughs. "But we love Charlie so much. I'm such a Goody Two-shoes, but I get a vicarious thrill at someone sticking it to the Man."

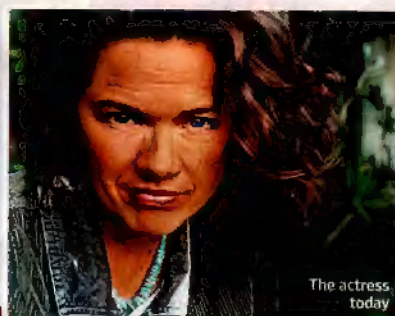
Craven cast her again in Dimension Films' troubled 2005 werewolf movie *Cursed*, but her scenes landed next to her Coppola movie appearances on the cutting-room floor. "*Cursed* was a mess," says Craven. In fact, over the past decade Langenkamp has turned up on screen in precisely one dramatic role: a 2002 guest spot on TV's *JAG*. Perhaps worst of all, last year witnessed the release of a *Nightmare on Elm Street* remake, starring Rooney Mara as Nancy. "I've been delaying seeing it," says Langenkamp. "I'm going to cry a lot when I do. I didn't want there to be a new Nancy."

In early 2010, Langenkamp returned to horror with *The Butterfly Room*, playing the daughter of legendary horror actress Barbara Steele. Producer Ethan Wiley had doubts about hiring someone who had been out of the acting game for so long, but was blown away by Langenkamp's performance. "Afterwards, we were all saying, 'If she wants to come back, she can clearly do it,'" he says. Langenkamp is excited about the film ("It was the first role I'd been offered in many years that actually had substance," she says) but is worried that the movie, which is still in post-production, will "fizzle and die" like so many of her other endeavors.

Meanwhile, the actress has been busy spreading the word about *I Am Nancy*. She hopes to sell the documentary to a cable network, but for now it's available for purchase through the website iamnancy.net. She insists that merely shooting the film has already raised the status of her character among horror fans. "The film has a lot to do with me being at conventions and asking the question 'Why is no one standing in line for Nancy's autograph?' I don't think I could make the movie now, because I am getting plenty of attention at conventions. People are loving Nancy more than ever." ■



Langenkamp and Englund with (from left) Jsu Garcia, Amanda Wyss, and Johnny Depp on the *Nightmare* set



The actress
today



With Depp
Nightmare



(Clockwise from top left)
Langenkamp, JoAnn
Matte, and Heidi Zeigler on
ABC's *Just the Ten of Us*

(PREVIOUS SPREAD) A MOUNTAIN IN ELIM STREET, NEW LINE/ROBAL COLLECTION; LANGENKAAP AND ENGUND: COURTESY OF HEATHER LANGENKAAP; THE SPREAD ON M.T. LANGENKAAP: COURTESY OF HEATHER LANGENKAAP; LANGENKAAP AND DEPP: NEW LINE/PHOTOFEST; LANGENKAAP (2): ANTHONY TREES